JESUS IN THE TEMPLE
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Psalm 19:1–10, 14
John 2:13–22

"Making a whip of cords,
he drove all of them out of the temple."
John 2:15 (NRSV)

The people who hanged Christ never accused him of being a bore—on the contrary,
they thought him too dynamic to be safe. It has been left to succeeding generations
to muffle up that shattering personality with an atmosphere of tedium . . .
a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies. He was tender to
the unfortunate, patient with honest inquirers, humble; but he insulted clergymen,
. . . referred to the King as "that fox," went to parties in disreputable company, . . .
assaulted indignant tradesmen and threw them and their belongings out of the temple. . . .
Officialdom felt that the established order of things would be more secure without him.
So they did away with God in the name of peace and quietness.

Dorothy Sayers
The Greatest Drama Ever Staged

You have come to your people in quiet and mysterious ways,
speaking your word of hope and challenge.
And you have come directly and in strength.
So we are here this morning to be in your presence—
to watch for you at work in the world and in our lives
and to listen for the word you have for us.
Startle us, awaken us, challenge us, and be with us
as we strive to be your faithful people,
following our Lord Jesus Christ
on the way to his cross. Amen.

Someone recently did a study to determine the life of a sermon—how long a sermon is remembered after it is preached. The results, I recall, were sobering for those of us who do this. The results were in terms of hours and days at best. By the next Sunday, most sermons are, as they say, history. In an introduction he wrote for the collected sermons of William Sloane Coffin, who preached many memorable sermons, Martin Marty tells the story of the British theologian who asked an audience of churchgoers to try to remember five sermons they had heard in their lifetime. Most were stumped. A few remembered a sermon for a special occasion, such as the funeral of a loved one. But most sermons are forgotten. The theologian then asked his audience to try to bring to mind five people through whom the hand of God was laid on them. Every hand shot up.

Even if you forgot every word Jesus said, you would not forget what he did on the day he visited the temple in Jerusalem. One commentator on the story said that it makes the preacher and the congregation a little queasy. You won't find many pictures of this event hanging on the walls of Sunday school classes alongside the popular images of a gentle Jesus with children or carrying a lamb in his arms. In fact, there aren't many artistic attempts to portray it all. Rembrandt did it. It's an incredibly strong, almost disturbing painting—chaotic, turbulent, angry, tables falling, dogs barking, religious leaders looking on in splendid isolation, and at the center, striking out with a whip, a strong, muscular, determined man, Jesus (see Fleming Rutledge, *The Undoing of Death*, p. 53).

It's a good story, particularly if you like politics, history, religion, and lots of political intrigue, with a hint of pay-to-play corruption. Who in Chicago can resist that? And you really need to know a little of all of that in order to understand the what and why of it. One of my youngsters said once, "Don't ask Dad a question unless you have a lot of time. He always starts with the Roman Empire and works his way up." Well, that's where this story begins. But first, a word about the Fourth Gospel and John's use of the term "the Jews." If you were following along with the reading in a pew Bible, you may have noticed a little on-the-spot editing, which is something the preacher or worship leader should not ordinarily do. I do it for two reasons. One, the use of the term "the Jews" throughout the Fourth Gospel has inspired anti-Semitism down through the centuries. You can read the Fourth Gospel and conclude, as many have done, that the Jews and Judaism were responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus, and you could, as many tragically have done, conclude that all Jews everywhere and at every time bear that responsibility. "Christ killers" they were called in the pogroms of the Middle Ages. And so that is one of the reasons I edit it out in my personal and public reading. And the second reason is that when John says "the Jews," he doesn't mean it. After all, he's a Jew. The disciples are Jews. Jesus is a Jew. It's a Jewish story. What John means when he says "the Jews" is the religious leaders at the time who were the friends of, and collaborators

with, the Roman occupiers and who were at first very suspicious of the activities of the young rabbi from Nazareth who was stirring up trouble, then overtly hostile, and finally decided that it was necessary to get rid of him. The writer has some specific people in mind. He doesn't mean all Jews everywhere or even all Jews at that time, and I wish he would have said it differently, but he didn't, so I take a deep breath and edit.

Back to the story. It's complicated. It begins with the Roman Empire. Its three main characters are Jesus, of course, and two others, one of whom is already dead, Herod the King, and Caiaphas the High Priest.

We know Herod's name from the Christmas story, because he's the king who, when he learns from the magi that a new king has been born somewhere close by, goes into a murderous rage and orders his soldiers to kill all the infants in Bethlehem. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph escape to Egypt and return when Herod dies a few years later. Herod was a very impressive and successful politician. He reigned a long time. He left a huge legacy in Palestine. If you visit Israel, the ruins of his construction projects are everywhere. The Romans controlled and governed through local leaders or kings who agreed to be cooperative. They are sometimes these days called "puppets." They retain office, but they do the bidding of the real power, in this case, Rome, represented by a regional governor. We will later encounter one of them, Pontius Pilate. Herod was a half-hearted Jew, and his survival strategy was to be more Roman than the Romans themselves (Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way*). He built and built big: seven palaces for himself, each larger than the emperor's palace in Rome. He built cities and fortresses, and for one of the most ambitious construction projects in history—Herodium—Herod literally built a mountain with a fortified palace on top, where he planned to be buried. Like Henry VIII of England, Herod not only built big, he was smart, utterly cruel when he needed to be, and successfully balanced Roman interests and his people's interests, no small accomplishment because his people mostly despised him for being so cozy with the occupying Romans and for being such a half-hearted Jew. So Herod decided to build them a temple about twenty years before the birth of Jesus.

It took forty-six years, and it was, by all accounts, a knockout—big, elegant, an architectural and aesthetic phenomenon. Herod built a huge platform on the top of a hill, quarrying and transporting 600-ton stone "bricks." Underground vaults supported the structure. The edge of this platform is today known as the Western Wall in Jerusalem. There were walls and towers and grand staircases, and the temple itself was made of white marble. It took your breath away, and Jewish people from all over the world traveled to Jerusalem to see it and be there for the special feasts and festivals, the High Holy Days.

The people in charge of Herod's temple—its maintenance and everything that happened in it—were the priests, the clergy. And the head of the operation was the chief priest. His name is Caiaphas. The Romans, who were pretty smart about controlling a hostile population, actually allowed the temple operation to levy and collect its own taxes. Now, if you are the chief priest and responsible for the welfare of the temple and the spiritual welfare of your people, it is a good idea to cooperate with the Romans, certainly not to irritate or alienate them. Caiaphas is good at his job too, has very cordial relations with the current king, Antipas, who is old Herod's son, and he counts on the king to keep everything on an even keel with the Romans.

One more important detail. The way you worship God in Israel is by sacrifice. It's deep in the tradition of the people, all the way back to Abraham. The way to thank God for God's mercy and steadfast love, for the gift of your life and the lives of your children, is by making a sacrifice of something that is precious to you. You give it back to the Lord. Sometimes it is a portion of grain. If it's an animal, the priest slaughters it and burns it on an altar and the smoke rises into the heavens and God is pleased. The theology, if not the specifics, continues to be at the heart of Jewish and Christian worship today. At the high point of our worship liturgy, we bring our gifts to God in gratitude for God's love for us.

Now something that noisy and messy requires some rules and regulations. That's where the priests come back in. Someone has to make sure the sacrifice is appropriate. You can't just bring in a sick, lame lamb; it has to be a good one. So there are inspectors. And if you don't have a lamb or a pigeon—and most pilgrims didn't—you ought to be able to buy one. So there is a small livestock market.

The historians tell us that one of the innovations Caiaphas, the chief priest, came up with is to bring all of that inside the temple—for convenience and where it could be controlled—inside the outer temple court, the Court of the Gentiles, where non-Jews were welcome to visit and pray. Some scholars believe there was an inscription on the wall of the Court of the Gentiles: "My house shall be a house of prayer for all peoples." That's a pretty interesting idea, from the prophet Isaiah, centuries earlier: that there is a universality about God and therefore about authentic religion. It's for everyone. You see those words frequently on synagogues—they're on the synagogue of Chicago Sinai Congregation—and occasionally on the facades of churches.

But there hardly was room for Gentiles, because the court was crowded. There were tables, a currency exchange where you could exchange Roman coins for shekels, the only money with which you could pay your temple tax. Next were the inspection tables to assure that the sacrifice you brought

along was acceptable. Finally, the livestock dealers where you could buy, depending on how much money you had, a pigeon, a pair of turtledoves, a lamb, a calf, even a full-grown bull. Then on up several flights of stairs was the altar where the sacrifice was consummated.

That's what Jesus saw when he came to the temple that day—the chaos and noise—but don't you also imagine he saw the whole system behind it: Herod who tried to kill him (surely his parents told him about that); Caiaphas, who knew how to keep the politicians happy? Don't you imagine he was terribly disappointed and offended and then angry that this beautiful court—whose purpose was to welcome all people—had become a marketplace? What happened next was spectacular. "Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple . . . sheep and cattle. He poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!'"

One of the conclusions we should not reach is that Jesus was attacking the temple and his own religion. He was an observant Jew. He and his family attended their local synagogue and made regular visits to the temple. There is no reason to conclude that Jesus was an opponent of institutional religion, that faithful discipleship is a private, internal journey. Eugene Peterson argues that to follow Jesus in the first century meant to follow him into the synagogue and temple and church.

So if it isn't the temple and religion itself, what is he attacking? He's attacking religion that has forgotten what it is for and has lost its way. Frederick Buechner writes, "There is no better proof for the existence of God than the way year after year he survives the way his professional friends treat him" (*Whistling in the Dark*, p. 6).

One cannot help but think of bizarre forms of religion claiming the name "Christian": Fred Phelps and his family picketing funerals of prominent Americans and funerals of American servicemen and women; the verbal violence, the signs saying "God hates America—God hates gays" and worse; or the "prosperity gospel" preachers promising wealth, health, and success if you believe and send in your contributions.

Jesus in the temple is standing in a long and honorable line of prophets who, centuries earlier, thundered against corrupt religion, religion that has lost its way, religion co-opted to support somebody's political, social, or financial agenda. Hosea, Micah, and Amos: "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Fast forward twenty centuries. Jesus wants his religion to be authentic. Jesus wants his church to know why it exists—not for its own sake, but for his sake, which means the sake of the world. Jesus wants the religion business to remember that it is for God and God's people, God's peace, God's kingdom on earth, and not itself.

And Jesus wants us to be careful about collaborating with political power. Be wary when the king builds you a temple. It is no secret that when political tyrants begin to seize and consolidate power, one of the first things they do is co-opt religion or stamp it out, jail prophets, shut down churches. Herod was an expert at it—co-opting religion. Roman emperors finally concluded that it was better to try to convince Christian leaders to cooperate than persecute, better to enlist the church in support of the empire. Kings of England created a church, appointed their own archbishops, and expected support and cooperation, and when the churchmen refused, the kings martyred them: Thomas Becket, for instance. Hitler created a whole department of religion and organized a German Christian Church, appointed bishops controlled by the Nazi party, jailed those who wouldn't go along. One of the most haunting images I have ever seen is in Martin Dobelmeier's fine film, *Bonhoeffer.* It's a Nazi rally, and in the front row, shaking hands with Hitler and showing the Nazi salute, are several Christian bishops in clerical collars.

This story should make us wary whenever religion becomes too comfortable with political power, wary whenever politicians co-opt religion for ideological purposes and, on the other side of it, when religion claims with absolute certainty that it knows God's political preference. The official German Church came perilously close to calling Adolph Hitler the savior of the German people. The Religious Right today confidently announces God's preference of candidates and positions on a long list of issues. This story should remind us of the wisdom of Abraham Lincoln, who said we should never claim that God is on our side politically, but pray that we might be on God's side.

This story should make us sensitive to and grateful for the reforming principle within religion. The healthiest religion not only tolerates but nurtures the practice of self-criticism and questions and complaints and suggestions for reform. The motion picture *Doubt* portrays the conflict between a Roman Catholic priest who expresses the reforming impulses coming out of the Second Vatican Council in the early '60s, and a very traditional nun school principal who believes change and reform threaten the very existence of the church. The story of Jesus in the temple should remind us, certainly not in a self-serving way, that the motto of the Reformation was "Ecclesia reformata—semper reformandum": the church reformed and always being reformed. It ought to remind us that the very best of our own tradition is a willingness to be self-critical and to be open to

change traditions and practices that are deeply held. We have done it—not without conflict and years, sometimes decades, of contentious argument. But we have reformed, changed our position on the issue of slavery, for instance, which many argued was ordained by God, supporting their position by quoting scripture. It took a long time, but that tradition was changed.

And we changed on the issue of the role of women in church and society. We used to believe, and could quote the Bible to support our position, that women are subservient to men, that women, because they are women, are not to assume positions of leadership in the church. We believed it was just the way God created us. But we changed.

And today we are in the midst of changing another certainty about which we used to be absolutely sure, quoting the Bible to support our position: namely that homosexual activity is always sinful and that gay and lesbian Christians cannot serve as leaders. We—and the Lutherans, Episcopalians, Methodists, all of us—are in the midst of looking again at the old certainty in light of new knowledge, and change is coming.

This story ought to suggest that there are times and occasions when anger is an appropriate response to injustice and evil. Jesus was clearly angry at what he saw happening to the religion and temple he loved, angry for his people, poor people, common people, exploited by systems over which they had no control.

So yes, this strong man makes us uncomfortable, just as what he did must have made his contemporaries, his followers, uncomfortable and afraid. What he did in the temple, most scholars agree, was the act that sealed his fate. In Dorothy Sayers' good words from a generation ago: "Officialdom felt that the established order of things would be more secure without him. So they did away with God in the name of peace and quietness" (*The Greatest Drama Ever Staged*). And yet, is there not something compelling about Jesus in this story, something beautiful and passionate and strong, something that makes us want to be brave and less patient with injustice, more willing to speak up, take a stand, turn over a few tables? Is there not something compelling and attractive in this Lord who throws caution to the wind and risks offending all the powers to do what he has to do? Is there not something powerfully important to you and me about this Lord who will go to the cross because of his uncompromising commitments and his uncompromising trust in God, this Lord who bids us today to take up a cross and follow?

And is there not something provocative about this Lord who barges into the temple and turns everything upside down and, who knows, might barge into

your life and mine, not wait patiently to be invited in, but might barge in and, in your life and mine, overturn a few tables? Who knows?